

On the Generation of Nominalization and its Ecological Significance in Poetic Language

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In consideration of the confused debates about the value of nominalization, this paper tries to explore the original generation of nominalization and analyze its use in poetry. This paper attempts to explore the generation of nominalization from a comprehensive point of view, to distinguish between “primary nominalization” and “ideological nominalization”, to trace the root of primary nominalization, and to analyze the use of primary nominalization in poetry. Based on these analyses, this paper points out that primary nominalization in poetry is more consonant with the Green grammar, with the undivided, holistic ecological worldview and has ecological significance. However, the ideological nominalization in some other nonliterary formal style is an obstacle to the solution to environment problem, and so we should understand the function of nominalization with its contexts and pay more attention to poetic language.

Keywords: nominalization, generation, poetic language, ecological significance, primitive nominalization

Introduction

This paper originated from reflecting on the debates about nominalization between Andrew Goatly and Mary J. Schleppegrell, Halliday and Martin. Their debates focus on the positive or the negative value of nominalization in the construction of Green grammar or a new undivided world view demanded by modern science. In the paper *Green Grammar and Grammatical Metaphor*, Goatly argued that, “ordinary language, especially the transitive clause, is inadequate to the representation of the world demanded by modern scientific theory, especially ecological theory” (Goatly, 1996, pp. 783-780). Halliday and Martin insisted that “the adequacy can be achieved by science abandoning nominalization or grammatical metaphor” (Goatly, 1996, pp. 537-560). In their view, by the device of nominalization, “processes (congruently worded as verbs) and properties (congruently worded as adjectives) are reworded metaphorically as nouns; instead of functioning in the clause, as Process or Attribute, they function as Thing in the nominal group” (Halliday, 2000, p. 352). But the direction of physics in the twentieth century has been exactly the opposite. According to their view, transitive clause is foremost and congruent one, and so they called for “recasting the nominal mode into a clausal one while developing the verbal group as a technical resource in the interest of presenting a more congruent view of the world in which process and participants are clearly identified” (Halliday & Martin, 1993, p. 23). On the contrary, Goatly argued that nominalization or grammatical metaphor “emphasize the primacy of process and downplay

anthropocentrism”(Goatly, 1996, pp. 537-560), and that they can be used and developed to become more adequate, and that they could be the resources for the reconstruction of “Green grammar” and undivided world view. Goatly’s point evoked Mary J. Schleppegrell’s critical reply. In the paper, *What Makes a Grammar Green? A Reply to Goatly*, Schleppegrell argued that nominalization without agent has negative impact on middle school students’ understanding of environmental issues, and it has negative effect on the resolution of environment problem by blurring and diffusing the responsibility, and therefore it cannot be an actual resource for Green grammar. (Schleppegrell, 1997).

And so, the debates around the positive or negative value of nominalization have been displayed in these people vastly, and these very debates inspired me to think why the debates occurred and to explore how the nominalization is generated, and what its value or disadvantage is for ecological worldview. A main cause of these debates probably is that the researchers consider nominalization from different view and discuss nominalization in general terms. More specifically, Halliday and Martin and Schleppegrell consider nominalization mainly at the social ideological level, i.e., from an outside view, while Goatly thinks nominalization at a more philosophical level, i.e., from a more inside view. Grammar is not just only constructed by acquired social function or social semantics, it is also inevitably determined by human’s natural body and mind conditions, by inner primary thinking and perceiving mode. Therefore, this paper tries to give a more comprehensive investigation on the generation of nominalization, and tries to distinguish different types of nominalization, and to analyze its ecologic value in poetic language.

Two Variants of Nominalization

In the paper, *Ecological Criticism of Language*, Matthias Jung said that,

If we for the moment disregard the inevitable absolute anthropocentrism of language, anthropocentric designations could be defined as referring to the natural environment and establishing humans as the only point of reference. I would distinguish two variants: An evolutionarily caused primary anthropocentrism as a consequence of the bio-sensory equipment of humans, which makes us for instance experience nature as world around us, as *en-vironment*. An ideologically centred Militaristic anthropocentrism: thinking in mere categories of usefulness, which defines certain species of plants as weeds and hides behind such phrases as livestock, live material etc. It has developed particularly in the wake of industrialization. (Fill & Muhlhausler, 2001, p. 275)

Using this classification, if we disregard the inevitable nominalization in language use, that is, the “descriptive nominalization” (Billig, 2008, pp. 783-800) which we have to use due to the inherent requirement of discourse and for the effective accumulation of knowledge, we can also distinguish two variants of nominalization. One is natural “primary nominalization”, which is mainly developed in an unconscious context, and mainly determined or driven by human’s natural inner primary bio-psychological condition or the deep cultural psychological tendency returning to the original chaotic state. This primary nominalization did not really exist in the primitive times, or was created by primitive humans, but it may be generated in some kind of mind situation similar to the original thinking or cognitive model, or created consciously or unconsciously in yearning for the original chaotic state or in the pursuit of a non-practical poetic aesthetic effects.

Another is social “ideological nominalization”, which is mainly developed in the conscious context, and mainly determined by human’s sophisticated pragmatic aims or social ideological function. It is the “ideological nominalization” that is criticized by both Halliday and Martin, Schleppegrell, as well as by Roger Fowler and

other critical discourse analyst. For this type of nominalization, Roger Fowler and East Anglian Group had once outlined its four kinds of ideological features: (1) deleting agency; (2) reifying; (3) positing reified concepts as agents; and (4) maintaining unequal power relations. The point “deleting agency” means that “speakers/writers can transform statements that identified agents of actions into agentless statements” (Billig, 2008, pp. 783-800). Through this transformation, the action executed by human agent acts as if by its own, and the information of human agent is deleted. All this kind of nominalization is like as “pollution of air”, “change of climate”. The “reifying” and “positing reified concepts as agents” means that “speakers/writers can convey that the entities, denoted by nominalization, have a real and necessary existence”, and “can then use the abstract reified concepts as agents of processes”(Billig, 2008, pp. 783-800). Through this means, the process has become a thing, and the objectivity of process is highlighted. Fowler et al. (1979) note that official discourse often uses nominalizations in this way, thereby conveying that present social arrangements are objective, unchangeable things (Billig, 2008, pp. 783-800). Through this kind of nominalization, the actual human agent hides himself, and so the critical discourse analyst thinks the nominalization as a kind of ideological “deceit”.

The Root of Primary Nominalization

Of the two kinds of nominalization, the social delicate ideological nominalization is easy to understand. Almost all the criticisms of the nominalization are aimed at this one. But for the former, the natural primary nominalization, we need to make our efforts to trace its generation and to prove its existence, as there are few scholars discussing such a kind of nominalization as far as we know. I suppose that the root of primary nominalization is “primary noun sentence”.

According to Lévy-Bruhl’s research on primitive mentality, primitive language is a kind of “participation” one, which is corresponding to the primitive “participation” (mutual pervasive) thinking. Such a kind of language is more consonant with the interrelated, undivided modern scientific world view than the sophisticated language also. Goatly said that, “paradoxically, this ‘primitive language’ would be more in step with recent, scientific, post-relativity models of the physical and biological universe than more ‘sophisticated’ languages like English” (Goatly, 1996, pp. 537-560). Following this way, if we can find the origin of nominalization in the human’s primitive language, maybe we can say that nominalization is helpful to the construction of the Green grammar and the Green world view.

However, according to the Halliday’s research on primary language of child, nominalization is not a primary language phenomenon, but one of the highly developed sophisticated grammatical metaphorical forms. Not only in child’s primary language, but also in uneducated adult’s daily language, there is no nominalization. Nominalization mainly exists in the adults’ scientific writing. Halliday pointed out that the primary language system of children has two levels: content and express. Otherwise, the language system of adults has three levels: Excepting for those two levels, there is an abstract “form” between “content” and “express”, namely, grammatical or lexical-grammatical level. In Halliday’s view, primary language of children cannot be named language, because there is no grammar in it. If there is no grammar in child’s primary language, and there is no possibility for nominalization existent in it. But what we would like to point out here is that grammar is also a phenomenon of diachronic development, and there is no perfect grammar in the original language, but perhaps there is a kind of “primary” grammar. Although there is no sophisticated “nominalization” in the primary

language, there is a kind of “primary noun sentence”, which has all the “virtues” that are ascribed to “nominalization” by Goatly, and thus we can speculate that “nominalization” might have something to do with the “primary noun sentence”.

What we mean by “primary noun sentence” is that a single noun functions as a sentence in the child’s primary language or the human’s primitive language. In the primitive language, there is not only “primary noun sentence”, but also “primary verb sentence”, referring to a single verb that functions as a sentence. Halliday had once pointed out that at a certain stage of child’s language development, children can speak the word “play”, the word “ball” separately, but they cannot speak the two words connectively like “play ball”. But in this primary language, the single word actually functions as a sentence. When a child speaks the word “ball”, behind the word there is usually a potential sentence like “give me the ball”, or “the ball is interesting” and so on. By the same token, when a child speaks the word “play”, there is also a potential sentence behind the word like “I want to play”, or “I want to play the ball” and so on. “Primary noun sentence” and “primary verb sentence” can be named together as “primary single word sentence”. According to the research on primitive mentality, the reason why primitive man use a single word as a sentence in their primary communication is that their bio-psychological condition and thinking level cannot allow them to make clear distinction between themselves and the world yet, and to control a sentence length beyond two words or more long. And so this wholeness is determined by the primary undivided human mentality condition. And so we name this sentence as “primary” noun or verb sentence.

Of the two kinds of primary single word sentence, the noun sentence is more primary, although there are more verbs in some primitive languages such as Hopi, Blackfoot etc.. Lyons (1966) said that, “nouns are primary, in the sense that they are linked referentially with ‘things’ (in the ‘nuclear’ instance)” (Halliday, 1967, p.17). Halliday remarked that, “within language, nouns probably play the central part in building up child’s view of his environment. They name concrete objects”(Halliday, 1967, p. 25). James C. Fernald’s also mentioned that, “the first words of all languages must have been in some way connected with material and sensible objects, as sun, moon, stars, earth, rocks, hills, trees, rivers, birds, beast, men, women”, etc. (Fernald, 1969, p. 365). This rule of language development also shows that the original words should be mostly nouns. According to the linguistic anthropology, primitive mentality and genetic epistemology research results, the reason why the noun is more primary than the verb is that objects existing in the space are easier to be perceived than the processes existing in the time. And human’s space consciousness is developed earlier than time consciousness, for the space itself is more visual than abstract time.

Halliday had talked about the important role of noun in the construal of child’s environment, but he didn’t pay more attention to the primary noun in the primary language of early childhood, for he thought that the primary language (“child tongue”) without grammar is not real language as mentioned above. The real language of child begins from “mother tongue”, in which the clause bears “a clear temporal priority” (Halliday & Martin, 1993, p. 20). We don’t doubt about the temporal priority of clause in “mother tongue”, but here what I keep in mind is that if Halliday had put back the history of language far enough and paid more attention to the “primary noun sentence”, maybe he would have made more insights the relation between the clause and the nominal one.

As R. G. Collingwood (Collingwood, 1958) stated, in the development of language, primitive language will be modified deeply by human’s reason, but linguistics has to step from this primitive language. If we look

language in light of the view of Collingwood, we might find that “single word sentence”, especially primary noun sentence, as the starting point of the human language development, has an enormous effect on the human unconscious mind, and it is like a kind of thinking “origin” or psychological “complex”, which is secretly affecting human’s later language use and language development, and makes human’s language return constantly to the more primary chaotic phase at a higher stage. This kind of “return” on the one hand is embodied in the use of “primary noun sentence” (such as “Ticket!”, “Snake!” and so on) on special occasions or in special types of discourse today; on the other hand, this return phenomenon is reflected in the employment of language forms that are similar to “primary” noun sentence in function or structure. Nominalization perhaps is the typical analogous form for this returning.

Since the primary noun sentence resulted from not complete distinction between human and the world, it represents a primary mutual permeation and chaotic holistic world view. Unlike this primary single word sentence, the “clause” model of language marks the full development of human thinking and cognition, and at this time people can make clear distinction between the subject and object, the self and surrounding environment, the thing and process, and therefore, it represents an “anthropocentrism” and “split” view of the world. Nominalization, as one kind of analogical return to the original language stage, is in a sense beyond the limitations of analytical thinking model of clause.

In this primary noun sentence, there is no verb, there is no agent, and there is neither division between the Agentive Participants, Affected Participants, and Circumstances, nor division between the Things and Process. Therefore, this primary noun sentence is in correspondence to the primitive participation thinking model and can keep line with the modern scientific world view, stressing the wholeness, the process, and the inseparability of the world. All these virtues or advantages which have been attributed to the nominalization by Goatly are in fact the intrinsic nature of primary noun sentence. And so we suppose these two language phenomena have a close relationship, and the primary noun sentence could be thought as the primary root of primary nominalization.

From this, we can find that not all the nominalization in modern language is prompted by social ideological function, and some nominalization might be determined by inner mental condition, by a deeper cultural psychological tendency returning to the primary noun sentence. Such nominalization is just what we call “primary nominalization”. The main place where this kind of language phenomenon exists is in poetic language, especially Chinese ancient poetic language. It is in the Chinese ancient poetry that we can more deeply perceive the relationship between the primary noun sentence and primary nominalization.

The Ecological Significance of Primary Nominalization in Poetry

In Chinese ancient poetry, noun bears an apparent priority, and the use of noun sentence is very frequent. Chinese ancient poets preferred to juxtapose nouns or noun phrases without any verbs or adjunctive constituents in their composition of poetic sentences. Here is a literal translation of the poem *Tianjingsha· Autumn Pondering*, written by MA Zhi-yuan in the Yuan dynasty.

Tianjingsha· Autumn Pondering
 Withered vine, old tree, faint crows
 Small bridge, running brook, family house
 Ancient road, westerly wind, thin horse

The setting sun in the west
A heartbroken soul in the end of the world. (LIU, 1986, p.22)

In this poem, the first three verse sentences are all without any verb, and are constituted merely by noun phrases, and it is arranged in a very typical “noun sentence” structure. The “noun sentence” structure here has some differences from the primary noun sentence we had discussed before, but since there are no verbs appearing in these lines, and the noun phrases function as sentence too, so it can also be named “noun sentence”. In this noun sentence structure, there is no agent, no verb, and the division between the subject and object thus vanishes, the central role of human is dissolved, and the thing is highlighted. The thing expressed in the form of a noun is not completely “still” or “frozen”, but rather in the process of movement. The noun sentence structure lets thing act on its own or lets thing be itself. Here man doesn’t manipulate the thing, he “loses himself in the thing” or “forgets himself in the world”, and “Thing and I” become one completely. In this noun sentence structure, the linear mode of transitive clause is broken down, and the linear temporal mode of presentation of the world has changed into a multidimensional spatial one, which transforms actually into a visual imagery at the same time. In Chinese ancient poetry, such examples are too numerous to mention one by one. Such a kind of noun sentence structure is universally interpreted as the perfect representative of Chinese ancient world view of “Unity of Thing and I” or “Oneness of Heaven and Human”, and it is regarded as the manifestation of modern ecological world view of anti-anthropocentrism by some ecological literary researchers.

It is mainly under the influence of these characteristics of Chinese ancient poetry that Ezra Pound created his famous “hokku-like” imagist poem using noun phrase and nominalization, *In a Station of the Metro*:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Gould, Roman, & Travisano, 2003. p. 663)

In this poem, there are not any verbs, and Pound used the noun sentence as a whole, and used the nominalization in part. “Apparition” is the noun form of the verb “appear”, and so the word “apparition” is a nominalization. It is difficult to say that the nominalization in this poem is determined by social ideology. Nominalization here is not used to escape the responsibility for a negative action, but used to represent an instant intuition of experiences, a stand-out visual spectacle appearing in front of the poet suddenly, or the instant “infusion” of a thing outward. Just as Pound explained, “in a poem of this sort, one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective” (Ruthven, 1983, p. 153). And so the nominalization here is not the “ideological nominalization” determined by social ideological function, but what we call the “primary nominalization”.

Through this primary nominalization, it is the thing, rather than the process, that is highlighted. But the thing here is not fixed. The noun converted from the verb through nominalization still retains some traces of the verb, and so “apparition” as a nominalization has both verbal and nominal properties, and therefore, it does not convert the process into a complete fixed static “thing”, and we would rather say that it has achieved a perfect mix of the dynamic and static state. Through this word we still can feel that mystical moving process of “apparition”, but the nominalization does let dynamic process be still, and makes the process be the object of “gaze” or “ponder”. When we gaze or ponder this “process”, the process is no longer a fleeting moment, an unidirectional flowing line on the surface, but a generating thing-process with width and thickness, or a becoming space-time which is

growing up, deepening down, and extending to all directions. These effects cannot be created through that clause model. Since clause model has a strong sense of flowing, using clause model in the poetry makes us feel as if one process has not been experienced before it has gone. And when we read the transitive clause, we feel that we go straight ahead ceaselessly along one line. Unlike the sense created by the clause which is going forward all the time, the sense produced by the nominalization is backtracking and stopping while going forward now and then, which makes the aesthetic experience become much deeper and more extensive.

Furthermore, the combination of noun phrase and nominalization breaks down the linear order of clause thoroughly, blurs the grammatical relation of words, and creates an interrelated multidimensional and becoming spatial scene and has much richer aesthetic significance. In such a multi-dimensional spatial scene, everything is correlative, and there is neither the focus of human body, nor the distinction between subject and object, but only the mutual infiltration of process and things, interaction of cause and effect, and thus it is no doubt that the nominalization in the poem is more in line with the modern science of dynamic, holistic, interactive, and interrelated ecological world view. The nominalization structure in poetry therefore has a kind of ecological aesthetic value and function, rather than the so-called “deceptive” function of ideology.

Conclusion

In this paper, in order to ascertain whether the value of nominalization is positive or negative, ecological or non-ecological, we have investigated the generation and development of nominalization from its social function and the inherent natural mind view, distinguished the two kinds of nominalization as “primary nominalization” and “ideological nominalization”, traced the root of primary nominalization from “primary noun sentence”, explored the primary noun sentence and primary nominalization in poetry, and revealed the different significance of nominalization with its contexts. As our investigation comes to an end, we insist that nominalization might both be manipulated intentionally by social ideology and be determined unconsciously by inner deep mentality, and accordingly, not all nominalizations are either the ideological “deceit” or the ideal resource of “Green grammar”. The ecological nominalization in some industrial environmental texts is apparently an obstacle to the solution to the environment problem. The primary nominalization, however, when combined with the noun sentence in poetry, is more consonant with the Green grammar, and with the undivided ecological worldview. Therefore, nominalization cannot be negated or affirmed indistinctly. For the ecological nominalization, we can criticize it from the Critical Discourse Analytical view, but for the primary nominalization in poetic language, we need to elucidate its ecological value and significance. Furthermore, since the poetic language, liberated from linear syntax and logic language and with more primary chaotic features of primitive language, is helpful to the realization of nominalization’s ecological value, there must be a close relation between green grammar and poetic grammar, and therefore, we should pay more attention to the poetic language for the construction of Green grammar and the ecological holistic worldview.

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